

The Role of Staff at Fountain House

Stephen Anderson, the Fountain House Annual, December 1985

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I am going to begin with a statement which I heard our director, Jim Schmidt, make some years ago. He said that working at Fountain House is more of an art than a science.

I have worked here since 1971. Previously, I had obtained a Master's Degree in rehabilitation counselling and worked briefly as a counsellor in a mental hospital. A number of years earlier I studied at a Protestant seminary for the ministry. I never completed those studies and never became a minister. But I am going to use a word from my theological studies to illustrate what that statement by Jim has come to mean to me. The word is "paradox." Working at Fountain House is more of an art than a science because it involves continuously dealing with paradoxes.

Paradox refers to a situation where there are two principles which on one level appear contradictory but on another level turn compatible or complementary. The contradiction occurs on the more immediately obvious logical level with the resolution at a more profound level. I am going to relate how some of these paradoxes as I have experienced them, while at times disconcerting, have enhanced the level of my job here.

The first paradox has to do with personal autonomy, personal freedom. My first day at Fountain House, I went to the clerical unit and stayed there for 2 ½ years. I never heard anyone call us a model then and had no familiarity with what we call the clubhouse model. I learned mostly by being immersed in the affairs of the clerical unit. I quickly learned that you were supposed to develop relationships with members by asking them to help you. The switchboard, the cleaning, the newspaper, all the various operations of the clerical unit were my personal job assignment, and I was to ask the members to help me handle those responsibilities. And that bothered me. From my training and previous experience I viewed the proper role of counsellor as a "sorter out." A counsellor should help people sort out their values, their needs and their goals and then to develop realistic plans for attaining those goals. A counsellor should not, however, except maybe in very broad ways, try to influence a person in formulating his goals. Bringing to bear upon a client or a member the counsellor's own needs and values would constitute an infringement of that person's freedom. And asking a member to help me to do my job certainly seemed like such an infringement.

I was assigned a supervisor at Fountain House who met with me once a week to talk about my work. He asked me one day, “what is the single most significant way that Fountain House can provide rehabilitation for a member?” I gave an answer which I thought was profound but now have forgotten. His answer to his own question, however, I vividly remember. He said, “The single most significant way that Fountain House can provide rehabilitation for a member is for him to experience being needed.”

The statement began a process of turning around my thinking about Fountain House. I began to realize that we are trying to do something more fundamental here than counselling. Typically, mentally ill people have the experience that no one needs them, no one looks forward to having them around except maybe for stuff at hospitals and clinics who need them in order to practice their occupation and keep their means of employment. And a person must experience himself as someone of value in order to have any reason to formulate his goals and to make plans and efforts for reaching at goals. So asking members to help rather than infringing upon their freedom contributes toward establishing the conditions within which the member can exercise freedom.

Another paradox revolves around a characterization which I kept hearing – that Fountain House was a “family.” That bothered me, too. I considered it simply inaccurate. Whatever Fountain House might mean to the members, for me it was not my family but my job. Vocational fulfilment through success on a job was a very important part of my life, but it was different from my family. We should call a spade a spade, I said. And for a long time I refrained from using the word “family” in reference to Fountain House.

Gradually, however, I developed the realization that this term also reflects a paradox about working here. For us on the staff, it is a job. We are hired and paid and given mandates and directives as to what we should do and how we should do it. We are evaluated and subject to promotion or firing according to our performance. However, these mandates are about doing something which cannot happen simply because it is mandated. Our job requirements involve functioning within the clubhouse structure so as to convey to the members an appreciation, a cherishing, an esteem which is like the nurturing support of family members toward each other. And the appreciations must be spontaneous and genuine in order to bring any self-enhancing response from members. You cannot do this simply because a boss tells you to do it. So it is a job which we have here but a job which demands a quality of involvement with others which is more than a job.

Another paradox involves leadership. Working here demands that staff take the initiative, often in a very strenuous way. One must take the lead in establishing and maintaining a communal environment where people’s views of themselves can be radically transformed, where scorned for their mental illness can be celebrated, and where those otherwise treated with neglect, regimentation or pity can instead experience the value of respect, trust and responsibility.

Yet achieving this purpose means exercising leadership in order to give it away. For the transformation enables members to develop their own capabilities for leadership and initiative. Staff attempting to hold and stratify leadership positions only frustrates this growth. But there are always new members and new challenges for old members. So staff must give away their leadership not to rest and withdraw but to take it up again and give it away again.

The most significant paradox for me has also provided the most significant reward for working here. We need relief from the pressure of continuous demands, relief from the situation of always finding more that should be done than we have the time and energy to do. This paradox is not about something staff is asked to give but about something we have the opportunity to receive, something given to us.

Often in my daily work here with the members, I feel the same kind of awe that I have felt on those few occasions in my life when I have been introduced to someone who has survived a concentration camp. I think of mental illness as being like living with the tortures of a concentration camp going on in one's own head. We meet here at Fountain House every day these people who have found the will power not merely to survive with the grace of still tortures but to survive with the grace of still caring about themselves and others. It is our job to show them the kind of appreciation which enhances their view of themselves, enabling them to be proud of their lights under a bushel but to let them shine. But as to the will power itself, that is something we do not have to do anything about because it is something we cannot do anything about. This affirmation can have its source only in each who has mounted the struggle.

If life is worth living in spite of the ravages of mental illness, then surely it is worth living for all of us. That confirmation of the value of life is the gift of the members to us. All we have to do is witness that gift and take it in and let it inspire us in doing our work and living our lives.

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